

Young Washington in Pennsylvania



*George Washington by
Charles Willson Peale.
Courtesy of The Historical
Society of Pennsylvania.*

Within the present boundaries of Pennsylvania a young Virginian, George Washington, began his important public service in preparation for the first great war in which American colonials and Britons fought side by side “for the blessings of religious and civil liberty.” The conflict, known

in America as the French and Indian War, began in the wilderness of western Pennsylvania, and the man later known as Father of His Country played a highly significant part in the opening stages of the war that made possible the settlement of western Pennsylvania.

The future of the Colonies was at stake in 1753 when a French army, proceeding from Canada, invaded the upper Allegheny Valley in the opening thrust to control the Ohio River Valley. Control by France of this great interior valley of North America would halt the westward expansion of the British colonies and confine them to the narrow region east of the Appalachians, relegating them to comparative insignificance.

The energetic Robert Dinwiddie, governor of Virginia, was quick to challenge this aggressive advance upon land claimed by the British king and

by Virginia. First, Governor Dinwiddie needed to give notice of trespass to the French intruders. This would not be an easy task, for hundreds of miles of wilderness lay between the frontier settlements of Virginia and the nearest French post, Fort Le Boeuf (now Waterford, Erie County). He asked a young man of twenty-one, member of a leading Virginia family, a surveyor, and a newly appointed militia adjutant with the rank of major, to undertake the mission. Young George Washington accepted without hesitation, and began his first endeavor on behalf of his country.

He set out from Williamsburg, Virginia, on October 31, 1753, traveling first to Wills Creek (now Cumberland, Maryland), where he hired Christopher Gist to act as his guide. The next day, November 15, he left this post on the edge of the settled regions, and with Gist and four other companions proceeded through the rain and snow. He reached the forks of the Ohio, the present site of Pittsburgh, about November 23, and described the place as "extremely well situated for a Fort." Next he came to Logstown (near present-day Ambridge). He spent five days at this famous Indian town, in council with the Native Americans, endeavoring to strengthen their friendship with the English. As a result, three Indian leaders—the Half King, Jeskakake, and White Thunder—and a hunter accompanied Washington when he resumed his journey on November 30.

On December 4, Washington and his unusual escort reached Venango (now Franklin), where French Creek enters the Allegheny River. Here he met the famous French Indian agent Joncaire, who had taken possession of the house of an English trader. Joncaire and his fellow officers entertained the Virginian with food and otherwise:

"The Wine, as they dosed themselves pretty plentifully with it, soon banished the Restraint which at first appeared in their Conversation; and gave a license to the Tongues to reveal their Sentiments more freely. They told me, That it was their absolute Design to take Possession of the Ohio. . . . They were sensible the English could raise two Men for their one; yet they knew their Motions were too slow and dilatory to prevent any Undertaking of theirs. They pretend to have an undoubted Right to the River, from a Discovery made by one La Salle 60

T H E
J O U R N A L
O F
Major *George Washington*,
S E N T B Y T H E
Hon. *ROBERT DINWIDDIE*, Esq;
His Majesty's Lieutenant-Governor, and
Commander in Chief of *VIRGINIA*,
T O T H E
C O M M A N D A N T
O F T H E
F R E N C H F O R C E S
O N
O H I O.
T O W H I C H A R E A D D E D , T H E
G O V E R N O R ' S L E T T E R ,
A N D A T R A N S L A T I O N O F T H E
F R E N C H O F F I C E R ' S A N S W E R .

W I L L I A M S B U R G :
Printed by W I L L I A M H U N T E R . 1754

Title page of Washington's Journal of the expedition to Fort Le Boeuf, Williamsburg, 1754.
Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg, Inc.

Years ago; and the Rise of this Expedition is, to prevent our settling on the River or Waters of it . . .

The next day it rained so heavily that Washington could not continue his journey. The wily Joncaire took full advantage of his opportunity to influence his native companions, plying them with liquor and urging them to remain at Venango for a council. As a result, Washington could not leave until the morning of December 7. Because of "excessive Rains, Snows, and bad Traveling, through many Mires and Swamps," he did not arrive at Fort Le Boeuf until the 11th.

The commander, Legardeur de Saint Pierre, received him with courtesy. Legardeur de Repentigny, commanding at Fort Presque Isle, who had some knowledge of English, came to translate Dinwiddie's letter, which raised the challenge:

The lands upon the River Ohio, in the western parts of the Colony of Virginia, are so notoriously known to be the property of the Crown of Great Britain that it is a matter of equal concern and surprise to me, to hear that a body of French forces are erecting fortresses and making settlements upon that river, within his Majesty's dominions.

. . . It becomes my duty to require your peaceable departure; and that you would forbear prosecuting a purpose so interruptive of the harmony and good understanding, which his Majesty is desirous to continue and cultivate with the most Christian King.

The "elderly Gentleman," as Washington described Saint Pierre, was unwavering in his resolve to carry out the orders of the French governor, the Marquis Duquesne. When Washington asked him "by what Authority he had made Prisoners of several of our English Subjects," he replied "that the Country belong'd to them; that no Englishman had a Right to trade upon those Waters; and that he had Orders to make every Person Prisoner who attempted it on the Ohio, or the Waters of it." His letter of reply to the governor of Virginia was equally firm. A single line of this answer sums it up:

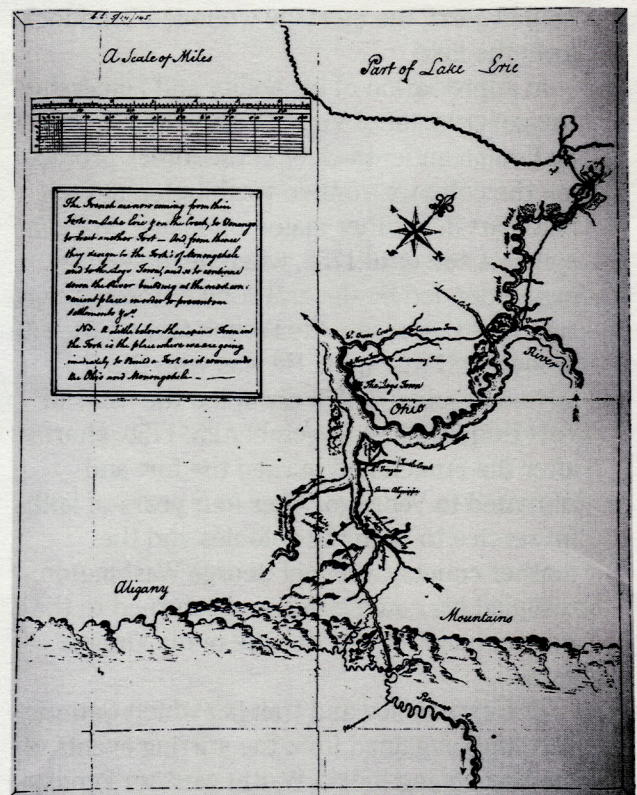


Washington as a colonel of militia, painted by Charles Willson Peale at Mount Vernon, 1772. Courtesy of Washington and Lee University.

"As to the summons you send me to retire, I do not think myself obliged to obey it." The letter closed with polite expressions of esteem for the governor and his representative: "I have made it my duty to treat Mr. Washington with all the respect owing to your dignity and his personal merit, and I flatter myself, Sir, that he will do me the justice to be my witness for it with you. . . ." However, continuous intrigue and interference by the French with Washington's Indian escort revealed the aggressive intention under the friendly veneer.

The journey homeward was even more arduous than the trip to the French fort. The French gave Washington and his party a canoe for the trip down French Creek, but they had “a tedious and very fatiguing Passage.” The stream was turbulent and full of floating ice; several times they had to “remain in the Water Half an Hour or more, getting over the Shoals.” Though they left Fort Le Boeuf on December 16, they did not arrive at Venango until the 22nd. Here the Indians gave in to the blandishments of the French, and Washington went on with only his white companions. The horses were tired and overloaded with baggage, so that they traveled very slowly. After three days of slow progress, Washington decided to set out with Gist by the “nearest Way through the Woods, on Foot.” He left the interpreter Van Braam in charge of the baggage, to bring it along as fast as might be convenient.

ensued Washington further distinguished himself. In the spring of 1754, now a lieutenant colonel, he commanded a force of Virginia militia sent to aid the new British fort that was being erected at the forks of the Ohio. Although the French had captured the fort before he crossed the mountains, he continued his advance into southwestern Pennsylvania. On May 28, he surprised a small French detachment under Ensign Joseph de Villiers de Jumonville on Laurel Hill in the present Fayette County. The skirmish which followed was the first battle of the French and Indian War. Jumonville was killed, and all but one of his party were either killed or taken prisoner.



present-day Uniontown, on the National Road), where Fort Necessity was hastily built. Besieged by superior numbers of French and Native Americans on July 3, Washington was compelled to surrender. The French, commanded by the slain Jumonville's half-brother Louis, permitted him and the garrison to "retire into his own country." The shortage of supplies and ammunition and lack of men had led to the first defeat of Washington's career.

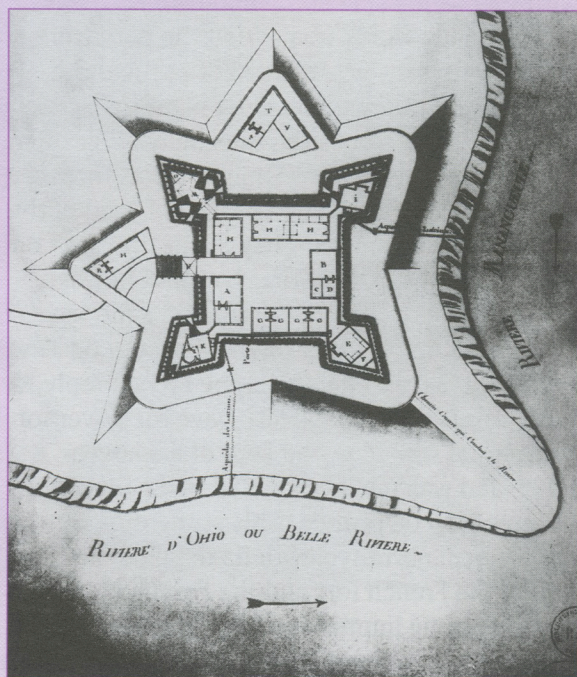
Washington served with distinction in the two later campaigns against the French in western Pennsylvania. In 1755, as volunteer aide on the staff of General Edward Braddock, he gave the British commander good advice which, if followed, might have averted the crushing defeat on July 9. Four bullet holes in his clothing and two horses shot from under him, however, were evidence of Washington's personal bravery in this disastrous battle. He helped carry the mortally wounded Braddock from the field.

In appreciation of his ability and leadership the government of Virginia made him colonel and commander-in-chief of the forces protecting the colony's frontier. Washington did not take part in another major campaign on Pennsylvania soil until 1758, when he joined the expedition led by General John Forbes to capture Fort Duquesne, the French fort on the site of modern Pittsburgh. He was with the advance troops which occupied the ruins of Fort Duquesne on November 25, 1758, shortly after the French had burned the fort and retreated to Venango. After four years of faithful service to both the colonies and the mother country, Colonel George Washington resigned his commission and returned to the pleasant and industrious life of his Virginia estates.

The experience and training which George Washington gained from the stirring events of the French and Indian War in western Pennsylvania were of inestimable value years later when he led the armies of the United States in fighting the War for Independence. He had emerged from the French and Indian War as the most distinguished soldier in the Colonies.

He had come to know many noted officers, some of whom were to fight with him, some against him, in later days. He had seen the mistakes of others and had learned from them. He had demonstrated courage, resourcefulness, and faithfulness in carrying out every task assigned to him.

The French and Indian War has often been obscured by the more earthshaking events of the Revolutionary War. But the resolution of the struggle for the western frontier has special significance in Pennsylvania history. For while victory in the French and Indian War did not end the struggle for the West, the outcome of the war dislodged the French from what was to become western Pennsylvania and made settlement there possible for the first time. Thus young George Washington, who would become Father of His Country, also played a key role in the settlement of Pennsylvania.



"Plan du Fort Duquesne" from a drawing in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

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